



# Stressed Employees Should Completely Disconnect from Work in Off Hours

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Wed, 2013-02-06 10:43

Busy employees may have the best chance of recovering from workplace stress by disconnecting entirely from work during their off hours, according to new research from Kansas State University.

New research indicates that while many busy and stressed employees stay connected to the job through smartphones, laptops or tablets during their personal time, they'd be better off unplugging and regaining work-life balance during their off hours.

YoungAh Park, assistant professor of psychology at Kansas State University and former businesswoman in the competitive South Korean work force, said that detaching from work mentally, physically and electronically will help stressed employees relax and recover. Unfortunately, that's easier said than done for some workers.

"Competition in the workplace is getting fierce," Park said. "People may worry about job security, want to increase their salary or advance in their career, so they feel they have to be more dedicated to their work. They show that by being available outside of normal work hours through communication and information technologies."

## Stress Spillover

Checking work emails using a smartphone or tablet outside normal work hours can be beneficial for catching up with work, but it can also lead to work-related stress that spills over to the home.

"If there are any unpleasant text messages or emails from work-related people – such as a boss, co-worker, clients, customers or contractors – you may be more likely to ruminate about work-related issues or worries. It will affect your feelings and behaviors at home, which could further influence people at home," Park said.

According to Park, if one spouse is experiencing work stress, it can affect the other spouse. If both are stressed from work and neither is able to use the home as a place to recharge for the next day, the stress can build up at home rather than decrease – a problem Park calls "a spiral of lost resources."

Meanwhile, people who are able to unplug from work activities when off the job experience lower levels of fatigue and job burnout, Park said. They also have higher levels of positive emotions and life satisfaction than those who remain connected to work-related tasks and matters outside of normal work hours. Creating a strong work-home boundary and setting restrictions on work-related communications while at home can help workers psychologically detach from work.

## Peer Pressure

Of course, the preference for separating work from home or family life may not be easy if coworkers or supervisors do not do the same. Bringing work home or contacting work-related people outside normal work hours can affect other employees' work-home boundary management and practices, Park said.

"You tend to conform to the norm in the workplace," Park said. "If people around you at work dominantly practice integration of work into the home and family life, then you are likely to conform to the norms – and the reverse is also true. For example, if you want to dedicate your off-work time to your family but your boss calls you about a to-do list for work over the weekend, you cannot totally ignore it and therefore, cannot fully detach yourself from work-related matters."

To create a good work-life balance, Park recommends setting self-regulated rules for use of communication and information technologies for work during nonwork time. Employees also may want to build others' expectations about their preferred work-home boundary and work-related communications outside of business hours. While urgent issues may compel employees to be involved in work during off hours, managers nonetheless must ensure their workers have time to recover from the stress once the job is complete. The results will benefit not just the worker but the employer, too.

"Research has shown that employees who unwind from work stress during off-work times are better at showing proactive behaviors to solve problems and are more engaged in their work," Park said. "In the long term, ensuring employee recovery from job stress by detaching themselves from work is beneficial for sustaining employees' well-being and job performance capabilities."

**Source URL:** <http://ehstoday.com/health/stressed-employees-should-completely-disconnect-work-hours>